

Antinatalism

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Introduction

The Greeks knew the terrors and horrors of existence, but they covered them with a veil in order to be able to live.

— Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*¹

Antinatalism is a way of thinking and acting that has no universally accepted definition. Surface net sources like Wikipedia in English have had it that it is a “philosophical position that assigns a negative value judgement to birth and views procreation as immoral.”² No major English dictionaries cover the term but two established French ones, *Larousse* and *Le Robert*, define “antinataliste” as an adjective and noun meaning “Qui vise à réduire la natalité” and “Qui cherche à limiter la natalité” – who or which aims to reduce or limit natality.³ *Le Robert* further connects the word to Malthusian population policies.

Wikipedia entries can be biased, unreliable, and, in the case of contemporary movements, in a constant state of flux due to internal feuds within their memberships, but the moral wrongness of reproduction seems to be at the core of at least most academic attempts to analyze and assess antinatalism. *Larousse* and *Le Robert*’s focus is at the level of populations and population control, which reflects the often disparaging usage of the word in the French language and, in our experience, also in Latin America and Finland. These two characterizations are hardly exhaustive, but their similarities and differences will come in handy when we proceed to more explicit definitions.

As already seen in the *Le Robert* reference to Malthusian thinking, antinatalism can be conceptually, morally, ideologically, and politically connected to other “isms” and practices. These include (alphabetically and among others) abortion, altruism, animal rights, atheism, ecology, egoism, environmentalism, euthanasia, extinctionism, machine consciousness, natalism, neocolonialism, nihilism, pessimism, promortalism, pronatalism, suicide, and veganism. The justifications presented for antinatalism offer a wide range, too. Population growth degrades the natural environment. The world is a bad place and should not be more populated. Reproduction requires sex and sex is a sin. Our children’s lives would be bad. We do not have their permission to bring them into existence. Life is suffering and we should not contribute to its continuation. Children are a burden. Children are a nuisance. Men are evil. Women are evil. Human beings are evil. Humankind inflicts suffering on other species. My life sucks. I wish I were dead. I wish I had never been born. My life has no meaning. Human life has no meaning. Life has no meaning. And to these we can add a plethora of religions and schools of thought. It is, to say the least, a mixed bag.

Our aim is to bring clarity to all this in three simple stages. The first (Section 1) is to show how ideas related to antinatalism have been expressed

in European thinking and its predecessors since Greek Antiquity, and how some of the major philosophies in the West can be seen as pronatalist attempts to suppress and counteract emerging antinatalist tendencies. This is an interpretation that puts the shoe on the other foot. The prevailing consensus has been that antinatalist sentiments have been gradually brought to light by ever-evolving forms of Western philosophy. While this may be partially true, the wider truth is quite the opposite. The basic tenets of antinatalism have been known to thinking individuals for millennia, but every time they have threatened to disturb hegemonic establishments they have been crushed by philosophical systems such as those of Plato, Augustine of Hippo, and others. This is a bold hypothesis, but we believe that we can lend it some surprisingly credible support.

At the second stage of our presentation (Section 2), we shall cut through the layers of “isms” temporarily associated with antinatalism by using, as a lens, extinctionism. The undeniable truth is that if no one has children, humankind will eventually die out. Doctrines that claim to be antinatalist have taken conflicting approaches to this matter, leaving both academics and the budding social movement perplexed and uncertain of what exactly is being promoted. Some so-called conditional versions of the creed have retracted from the extinctionist conclusion and settled for temporary or directed condemnations of reproduction. Without claiming linguistic authority on the definition, we argue that these philosophies could best be called selective pronatalism. We further argue that voluntary extinction of the species, understood correctly against current ethical ideals, should not jar our sensitivities excessively. This is another bold claim, but one that we trust we can make comprehensible and relatively palatable.

The third stage of our presentation (Section 3) takes us back to the beginning and demonstrates that one of the earliest recorded antinatalist attitudes may, with interim scientific and political developments, have come of age and may now be ready to serve the emerging social movement that questions the practice of reproduction. In the historical part of our narrative, we have identified the quest of meaning in life as the constant driving force of antinatalism. It has been muffled and stalled by influential Western philosophies but it has also gathered momentum through other advances in thinking and human interaction. Our argument, in all its simplicity, is that near-universal meaning in life can be secured, but only by imposing a pronatalist lifestyle upon new individuals in a manipulative way that we should no longer consider attractive, or acceptable. This, instead of the currently popular arguments from poor quality of all life (unconvincing), asymmetry of good and bad (incomprehensible), and lack of consent (complicated), would provide practical antinatalists, including artists and activists, with a relatable reason for not having children and proposing the same to others.

We opened this Introduction with a quote from Friedrich Nietzsche declaring that “The Greeks knew the terrors and horrors of existence, but they covered them with a veil in order to be able to live.” We believe that he was on to something here and we add some key observations to his.

Not only the ancient Greeks but all thinking members of European societies have known the “terrors and horrors of existence,” such as they are. Their reactions to these, as far as we can see, have depended on their underlying views on the meaning of life. The realization that there is no cosmic, ordained purpose has led people to philosophical pessimism; to concentration on the small, concrete pleasures in life; and, gradually, to antinatalist convictions. Insisting that there must be an overarching, universal purpose, on the other hand, has prompted thinkers to create complex, belief-defying edifices that explain the world and humankind’s role in it in terms of divine order, afterlife, philosophical or political optimism, and eventually explicit pronatalism. This is the story of Western philosophy as a series of reactions to meaning-related challenges, in the service of traditional power structures. It is the story told in Section 1 of this Element – “Western Philosophy as a Struggle against Antinatalism.”

In addition to the “terrors and horrors of existence,” the fear of nonexistence has played an increasing part in reactions against antinatalist sentiments. This is especially true of philosophical considerations of the last few decades. A prominent ethical theory, utilitarianism, has slid into relative disgrace, in part because some of its versions can be associated with humankind’s obligatory demise. According to negative utilitarianism, suffering should be minimized, maybe eliminated altogether, and what better way of accomplishing this than to end sentient, including human, life entirely? To a considerable degree, this is the question that defines the competing forms of antinatalist philosophy today. The distinctions that it forces and the specifications that answer to it make up the story of the varieties of contemporary antinatalism. It is the story told in Section 2 of this Element – “Antinatalism and Extinction.”

Quoting Nietzsche one more time, while both negative utilitarians and their critics are well aware of the “terrors and horrors of existence,” only the critics, like the Greeks and many others throughout the history of Western thought, have “covered them with a veil in order to be able to live.” The veil has always consisted of a meta-narrative of life’s universal meaning. The hardships are not denied but they are justified by an account of a higher purpose, first cosmic and divine, then more and more this-worldly. With secularization, technological advances, and an increasing awareness of the importance of freedom and happiness, we may have now reached pronatalism’s last line of defense. It is that reproduction gives our lives meaning. And it does, but not spontaneously.

Our existence as reproducers has purpose only if we are manipulated into thinking so before we can freely form our own ideas of happiness and life goals. This, and its contradiction with widespread ethical ideals, is the story told in Section 3 of this Element – “Procreative Self-Corruption.”

But enough of these abstract sketches of what we are going to say and onwards to saying it, with only these methodological notes beforehand. Our approach is that of applied moral and political philosophy. We seek evidence of sentiments, lines of thinking, arguments, and theories that touch upon antinatalist and related themes; expose connections; and weave a picture of how the philosophy and the movement have, or may have, developed during the millennia from Greek Antiquity to the present day. Our inferences aspire to be conceptually consistent and coherent, but we do not claim universal validity or soundness to our conclusions. Too many steps along the way are positional readings acceptable to thinking people with temperaments and worldviews matching ours, yet unacceptable to thinking people with different attitudes and background beliefs. Our findings take the form of assertive hypothetical – rather than categorical – imperatives. If and when our premises and deductions sound plausible, probably our conclusions should be taken seriously, too. But on to the story.

1 Western Philosophy as a Struggle against Antinatalism

The history of antinatalism is an elusive concept, not least because the doctrine and sentiment can be defined in many ways. In the Introduction, we listed a plethora of “isms,” attitudes, phenomena, and arguments that could be chronologically cataloged; and Karim Akerma,⁴ Kateřina Lochmanová,⁵ Théophile de Giraud,⁶ Masahiro Morioka,⁷ Ramesh Mishra (under the pseudonym Ken Coates),⁸ and others have done just that, all from their own points of view. It is not our intention to replicate this work.

We give structure to our own narrative by focusing mainly on the lack of meaning in human life; and on European attempts to come to terms with this. When related considerations emerge, they are duly noted and their links to contemporary antinatalism recorded.

By meaning we suggest a higher purpose or goal or a part to be played in some larger-than-us plan. The desire for this kind of meaning is by no means self-evident. People living ordinary lives are seldom preoccupied by the idea of a wider purpose, when all the guidance and consolation they need can be found in daily routines and social expectations. For some reason, however, the longing for something more has been present in Western thinking at least since the seventh century BCE. Life has its hardships – or, more dramatically, life is suffering – but this could be tolerable if we knew that those hardships are

meaningful in an objective, universal way. Something in ancient Greek thought seems to have shaken the belief that the humanlike Olympian gods could guarantee such meaningfulness.⁹ The doubt has persisted among thinking individuals throughout the centuries.

1.1 First Alarm: Scientific Worldview and Aversion to Children

An early yearning for meaning is indirectly expressed in the mythical character of Silenus, tutor and companion of the Greek wine god Dionysius. Silenus, a minor god himself, drowned his sorrows in wine and sex, only to find in his more sober moments that there was nothing in life to hold him, or anyone else for that matter, in its grip. In a quote from Aristotle preserved to us by Plutarch, Silenus reluctantly answers a question posed to him by King Midas about what is valuable in life:

Ephemeral offspring of a travailing genius and of harsh fortune, why do you force me to speak what it were better for you men not to know?

For a life spent in ignorance of one's own woes is most free from grief. But for men it is utterly impossible that they should obtain the best thing of all, or even have any share in its nature (for the best thing for all men and women is not to be born); however, the next best thing to this, and the first of those to which man can attain, but nevertheless only the second best, is, after being born, to die as quickly as possible.¹⁰

How should this be interpreted? A rash modern antinatalist could zoom in on the best-not-to-be-born part and say that ancient Greeks wanted to stop reproduction immediately. A promortalist – one who favors death over life – could pick up the last words, about dying as quickly as possible. These do not, however, exhaust the possibilities.

Starting the reading from the beginning, the text says that it is better not to know about life's true value because it has none, as a thinking person would be aware. It has woes and grief but no redeeming meaning. This is why it would be best not to be. But where should we go from here? Did the ancient Greeks, through their folklore, send us a message of pessimism and nihilism? Did they advise us to cease childbearing and to kill ourselves? That is doubtful, but what we can deduce is that such notions were known to them, ready to be linked with other views, possibly in combinations that would have the potential to challenge traditions and authorities.

The Wisdom of Silenus, as it is known in the literature, had expressions that well-preceded Aristotle, notably in the elegies of Theognis of Megara and the tragedies of Sophocles and Euripides;¹¹ and life's meaning apart from the wonders of the sky and the stars, the moon and the sun was questioned by

Anaxagoras,¹² all in the fifth and sixth centuries BCE. As for themes pertaining more directly to modern antinatalism, Thales of Miletus, of the sixth century BCE, is credited as the first pre-Socratic philosopher to say that to love one's children means not having them.¹³ We have not included all the relevant quotes here but we have created an openly accessible repository where all the fragments and their sources can be found.¹⁴

While we identify the lack of meaning in life as the driving force of our story, we also recognize that it is always amplified by some other developments in thinking or social arrangements. In the case of the first antinatalist alarm, as we call it, the amplification comes from the scientific worldview and the apparent aversion to children that can be found in Democritus, the founder of the atomistic school.¹⁵ The core of his teaching was that this world is composed of matter, or, to be more precise, small, invisible and indivisible particles that come together to form the visible and divisible objects that we can perceive. It is easy for us to relate to this theory because it is, essentially, the foundation of our own current worldview, give or take that our atoms can be further divided. Plato and Aristotle later took issue with the view in what, in our parlance, is the first reaction to the antinatalist alarm.

The textual evidence of Democritus' thought is indirect and uncertain, but these fragments, if reliable, give some clues at least to what others have seen him as advocating: "To bring up children is perilous; success is full of trouble and care, failure is unsurpassed by any other pain."¹⁶ And, "I think that one should not have children; for in the having of children I see many great dangers, many pains, few advantages – and those thin and weak."¹⁷ Thus, "Anyone who has a need for children would do better, I think, to get them from his friends. He will then have the child he wishes – for he can choose the sort he wants, and one that seems suitable to him will by its nature best follow him."¹⁸

The antinatalist could, again, hail the advice not to have children, but as the next lines show, Democritus seems to be fine with the idea of reproduction, if only the risks can be controlled by using other people's children. This is a slightly strange idea, but as we shall see, Plato, in his *Republic*, seems to have addressed exactly that issue. And then, in another fragment, we can detect a more direct threat to the pronatalist hegemony:

Men think that, by nature and some ancient constitution, it is a matter of necessity to get children. This is plain from the other animals too; for they all naturally get offspring, not with any benefit in view – rather, when they are born, they suffer and rear each as best they can, and fear for them as long as they are small, and grieve if they are hurt. Such is the nature of all things which have a soul; but for men it has come to be thought that some gain actually comes from the offspring.¹⁹

To interpret this in line with our hypothesis, tradition has it that people should have children for a higher reason, although it is clear that there is none and that, just like other animals, they are following nature's call and then assigning meaning as an afterthought. Plato's response shows how our interpretation may not be as outlandish as it seems.

1.2 First Reaction: Giving Birth to Western Philosophy

A. N. Whitehead, a renowned British logician of the early twentieth century, has been reported to opine: "The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato."²⁰ Insofar as he was correct, we can add that in this case Western philosophy can also be seen as a series of responses to outbursts of antinatalist and related thinking.

Plato's *Republic* is a Socratic dialogue that sketches the main principles of an ideal city state, the *polis*, and justifies obedience to its rules.²¹ Like his predecessors, Socrates was influenced by Zoroastrian thinking and its tenets.²² Those were that truth is preferable to tradition; that good and evil form a dualism; and that in an afterlife moral people will be rewarded while the immoral will be punished. The Socrates of Plato's dialogues emphasizes the first of these, the primacy of truth, while Plato himself employs the others in the form of myths when he has a crucial point to make.

In Plato's ideal state, all citizens, according to their ability and inclination, have their assigned classes – they are workers, soldiers, or guardians, all with their designated duties and privileges. The population size is limited, as he specifies in his last dialogue, *Laws*, to 5,040 ($= 1 \times 2 \times 3 \times 4 \times 5 \times 6 \times 7$) – although slaves, at least, are not included in this count. Reproduction is strictly controlled, expert officials encouraging, behind the scenes, unions between the best individuals to guarantee the best brood. Children are educated by the *polis* and they do not know who their parents and siblings are. Women and men alike can rise to the highest positions. The state is defined by selective eugenic pronatalism with traces of pragmatic gender equality.²³

The arrangement offers a practical solution to Democritus' first problem, the danger of having one's own unpredictable offspring. Matchmakers secure the quality of future citizens and parents need not look after their children. Democritus' second challenge, the lack of meaning in an atomistic world, was a tougher nut for Plato to crack, and had to be dealt with theoretically, by resorting to myths – accounts that, in ancient Greece, provided a probable explanation for phenomena that could not be fully understood in terms of reason and observation.

According to one such account in Plato's dialogue *Timaeus*, the world was made by a demiurge, an artisan god, who had to produce order and proportion

out of the elements available, constrained by the principle of necessity. One interpretation has it that after all the perfect material had gone to constructing the stars, people had to be created out of inferior stuff and were left initially imperfect. Our lives on Earth are needed to reach perfection and to complete the demiurge's work. This explains why we are here and gives our this-worldly existence its meaning.²⁴

The ideal state is the setting in which we can fulfill our destinies. By conducting ourselves according to the laws of the republic, we ascertain that creation reaches its goal. In addition, we ourselves stand to gain from the required obedience, because after death our lawful behavior will be rewarded and unlawful behavior punished, as described in the myth of Er in the concluding chapter of the *Republic*.²⁵

What can we learn from this? Can we close the case, observe that Democritus was wrong, and note that the good pronatalist order has been restored? Or should we reject Plato's unscientific use of myths and deny that he has proven anything? Luckily, we do not have to go to either extreme. We can identify this sequence of conflicting ideas as the first confrontation between Western philosophy as exemplified by Plato, safeguarding natalism, and – to use Ramesh Mishra's term – rejectionist philosophy as illustrated by the fragments of Democritus and others, questioning meaning and leading the way toward more pronounced antinatalism.²⁶ The pattern that emerges here has been repeated throughout the history of Western thinking.

The details of Plato's theory were immediately questioned by his contemporaries and followers. Aristotle thought that not knowing one's parents and siblings would be unnatural and lead to incest and loss of healthy family ties. Based on his own philosophy, he suggested more traditional policies both for reproduction and division of labor in the state. Where Plato had relied on myths, Aristotle claimed to build his model on biological and psychological facts. Human beings need nutrition and shelter like all animals; they propagate and raise their offspring; and display a tendency to seek pleasure and avoid pain. In addition to these, our practical reason tells us how we can best reach our goals. A virtuous life without excesses – keeping to the Golden Mean – in a well-ordered society is a reward in itself and gives our lives meaning.²⁷

Similarly, Epicurus and Zeno of Citium crafted their own theories, one on the atomism of Democritus, promoting moderation; the other on Socratic teachings as interpreted by the Cynics, stressing the control of one's mind. The preserved fragments of their works have little to say about reproduction but by making life's purpose a more personal matter they did pave the way to the next alarm, which strongly features the philosophical schools they founded, Epicureanism and Stoicism.²⁸